Ms Joanna Simons
Chief Executive
Oxfordshire County Council
County Hall
New Road
Oxford OX1 1ND

1 December 2005

Dear Ms Simons

ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL'S EDUCATION AND CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE SERVICES 2005

This letter summarises the findings of the meeting held on 20 July 2005 to assess the performance of the education and social care services within your authority and key points from the children's services inspection in July 2005. We are grateful for the information which you provided to support this process and for the time made available by yourself and your colleagues to discuss relevant issues.

Being healthy

Outcomes in this area are satisfactory. There is good health promotion in schools with appropriate targeting of resources to particular locations where the need is greatest. Of those involved, 46 schools have achieved the healthy schools standard representing nearly one fifth of schools in the county. Children and young people receive appropriate sex and relationship education. However, although teenage conception rates are below national averages, there has been, until recently, an upward trend against a national picture of decline.

There is a good level of Primary Care Trust (PCT) commitment to and involvement in, the planning and development of services. For example the Oxfordshire County Council children and young people's plan forms part of the local National Health Service delivery plan. Similarly, the PCT has been involved in reviews such as the Best Value Review of services for vulnerable children. There are robust arrangements for Looked after Children with 90% receiving all relevant health checks, immunisations and dental checks.

There are a number of strengths in child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), for example in supporting those with acute mental health needs and in the placement of a CAMHS worker in the youth offending team. However, there are particular weaknesses especially in the co-ordination of services at tier 1 and their availability at tier 3. This has been recognised by the council and a review, together

with a needs analysis involving consultation with parents and children has been undertaken. A strategy to re-design and re-commission services to increase provision for children with conduct disorders and learning disabilities is now in place. It is expected that early intervention teams will be launched in September 2005 initially in 'high need' areas at tier 2, with a focus on supporting tier 1 and signposting into tier 3.

Oxfordshire has relatively high levels of 'binge drinking' and drug taking, particularly cannabis and cocaine in certain localities. A comprehensive three-year strategy for drugs education and prevention was published in September 2004. There are now better data to inform the action plans and extra resources have been targeted at drugs education in schools including training for governors and parents, and for those working with young people. Additional staff have been recruited and a treatment centre is planned. Nevertheless, whilst there is much positive action, there is much still to do.

Staying safe

Outcomes in this area are satisfactory, with some very good outcomes but also some crucial areas for improvement.

There is an extensive network of family support services, many provided by the voluntary sector and some targeted services such as four new integrated support services in areas of high need, which build on the success and experience gained through the education action zone initiative. Effective arrangements for monitoring and combating racial discrimination are in place in schools. Young people have identified bullying as a concern but there is no systematic process for monitoring the incidence.

There is a comparatively low rate of referrals received by social care services and a higher than average percentage lead to initial assessments. It is not clear whether the thresholds for access to assessment and services are pitched too high. Some users of services and some other professionals believe that it can be difficult to engage and retain social services involvement. Crucially, the children's services inspection found one assessment team were struggling to cope with the volume of new work, the number of cases pending action and a number of which were behind the target times for initial assessments. This is in contrast to the wider picture for the county where the council's figures indicate that 67% of initial assessments are conducted within seven days, better than the council's comparator group and the national average (63%). The promptness of the completion of core assessments has improved to 81% within 35 days, well above the national average (68%).

Information provided by the council indicates that all child protection cases on the register are allocated. Ninety eight per cent of reviews are conducted within the required timescales. There has been a recent upwards trend in the number of children on the child protection register, but this is still within the range expected. The council

reviewed the rate of re-registrations on the child protection register, which in the preceding year had risen to above average to examine whether children were being removed from the register too quickly. This was also featured as an issue in a serious case review. The review of individual cases indicated that this was not the position. The majority of children were re-registered following changes in circumstances and more than a year after de-registration. The hospital social work team offers an excellent service which works effectively with other professionals within the hospital.

There is a good level of placement stability for looked after children (LAC) and with increases in use of foster care, and LAC placed for adoption and a good rate of kinship care. The council has produced a wider placement strategy that aims to improve the range of placements for LAC, to particularly increase local placement within the county, to meet diverse needs and to avoid the need to admit children and young people to care through increased family support services. The council has raised standards in its own residential provision for children and young people following adverse findings in some inspections last year.

Services for children with disabilities are of good quality. The service re-design project has resulted in the re-configuration of the resource centres for families with children with disabilities. It was carried out in partnership with Barnardo's and the NHS trust following extensive consultation with those using the services. Two of the centres have been re-furbished to a good standard; however, some parents feel that their access to and the level of services has been reduced as a result of the re-configuration.

Enjoying and achieving

Outcomes in this area are good overall and in some aspects of education, very good. There is strong and visionary leadership of education services in Oxfordshire. A number of significant changes in the last few years have led to improved services. For example, the re-organisation of secondary schools in the City of Oxford reduced the number of schools from five to four with a subsequent reduction in surplus places; the development of a new integrated pupil referral unit and the re-organisation of special education provision together with a re-designation of a special school.

Early years provision is a key priority for the local authority and there are clear strategies to raise quality at the Foundation Stage. Targets for increasing childcare places have been met and those for out-of-school places exceeded.

On entry to school, standards are above average and at key stages 1 and 2 in line with national averages, although below similar authorities.   However, although results in reading and mathematics have improved, the rate of progress is slower at these stages than for similar authorities. Too few pupils who achieve Level 2C at Key Stage 1 subsequently achieve Level 4 at Key Stage 2. At Key Stage 3 there has been significant improvement in attainment in English, mathematics and science. These are

now above national averages. Value added progress from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3 is above expectations. However, at Key Stage 4 while percentages achieving 5 GCSE A* - C grades have been in line with national averages, they dropped below in 2004. Although value added scores of Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4 are in line with expectations overall, in a significant number of secondary schools progress is below expectations.

The local authority has in place a number of important strategies to bring about improvement. School attendance has improved year on year and is now very good. There has been positive action in reducing the number of permanent exclusions and re-integrating those receiving alternative education back into mainstream schools. While the attendance of Looked after Children is lower than comparators, a range of strategies are in place including the development of a 'virtual' school, a red/green category system and home visits to address this. A revised strategy for school improvement and a comprehensive range of benchmarking data are ensuring more targeted monitoring, challenge, intervention and support in schools. The number of schools causing concern has reduced significantly.

Support for children with special educational needs is good. There has been a halving of the number of tribunals, excellent completion rates for statements and much joint working with partners. The educational achievements of Looked after Children have improved, but challenging targets for PSA have still to be reached. The council has a vigorous programme of learning support to LAC including the reach-up team. At all key stages, the attainment of learners from black and minority ethnic backgrounds is lower than that for similar pupils nationally. Tackling this underachievement is one of the authority's priorities and a 3-year 'ethnic minority achievement service plan' which identifies priorities, accountabilities, success criteria, timescales and monitoring arrangements is in place.

A good range of recreational and voluntary learning activity is available for children and young people through schools, the youth service and community initiatives. Growth in the number of after school clubs; take up in outdoor activities and the Duke of Edinburgh's Award; school holiday programmes including arts and creative activity opportunities indicate that children and young people have a good range of opportunity to achieve personal development and enjoy recreation.

Making a positive contribution

Outcomes in this area are good. Young people are able to be involved in shaping services provided and their own lives. There has been a thorough and extensive consultation exercise to support the Best Value Review of services for vulnerable children through the Sounding Boards. These have successfully engaged young people in the issues and provided good opportunities for them to give feedback.

Levels of youth offending are below the national average and have been falling over the past five years. Schemes such as the Positive Activities for Young People and the Identification and Support Scheme have contributed to this trend. The Youth Offending team provides a good service, although there is scope to reduce the offending of looked after children. Joint action plans with partners are part of the council's local public service agreement. There are indications that they are being effective and on course to achieve PSA targets.

The council acknowledges a need to develop an overall co-ordination strategy for participation. It plans to develop a comprehensive approach to surveying the attitudes of children and young people which will inform service development and to help evaluate the impact of developments in services.

Through a project introduced by the leaving care team, former LAC support other LAC and those leaving care in crucial stages of transition in their lives. LAC contribute well to their reviews and care planning. Each has a Connexions personal adviser.

The council has a good range of out of school activity centres which effectively engage vulnerable groups of young people though holiday activities.

The council had a long term programme with the Save the Children Fund to raise the profile of the Children's Rights agenda in the statutory and voluntary agencies across Oxfordshire. The initiative has now been continued through a number of streams, including a peripatetic children's rights worker and investment in the Sounding Boards.

Achieving economic well-being

Outcomes in this area are good. Through the good work of the leaving care team, there is a higher than average participation of young people in education and work based learning at ages 16 and 17. The take up of young people from black and minority ethnic groups in education, training and employment is also higher than average. For young care leavers, participation is very good with an increase in take up from 54% to 84%, exceeding government targets. However, the percentage of supervised young offenders in education, employment or training is half the national average and a particular challenge for those over sixteen.

All school students have at least one opportunity for work experience during their time at school and many participate in other work-related activities organised by the Education Business Partnership and Young Enterprise. There are no inadequate sixth forms: attainment is at the national average; Level 1 and Level 2 results have improved; and value added is commensurate with expectation.

There has been considerable progress following an unsatisfactory 14 – 19 area inspection in 2003. A cross-sector strategy group has been established together with a number of sub groups each with a clear work focus; eight 14-19 local area partnerships; a comprehensive strategy for improvement; and a new strategic manager. Additional resources have been earmarked to improve the curriculum offer for young people through extended vocational training and qualification opportunities. Whilst the impact of these initiatives are not yet obvious in terms of outcomes for young people there has been a sea change in the last nine months and a strong commitment and enthusiasm is leading to improvements in most areas.

The transition at aged 16 for learners with statements of special educational needs in special schools is of concern however. Currently there are no special schools in Oxfordshire with facilities for these young people so they must either transfer to a Further Education college or move to a school outside the county. Well-structured support and transition planning arrangements start in year 9 and continue throughout years 10 and 11. A lead professional, placement panels, visits to new establishments and an appeals procedure are all in place. Nevertheless, the local authority recognises that the situation is not ideal and is working with the local Learning and Skills Council which has commissioned an independent review of provision for post 16 education for children with SEN in Oxfordshire.

The cost of accommodation in Oxfordshire and Oxford City in particular is high; housing services for young people leaving care are disjointed and patchy across the county and a wider range of suitable accommodation for young people leaving care is needed particularly in Oxford city.
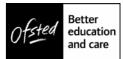
Summary

Strengths	Areas for improvement
Being healthy: • good health promotion with appropriate targeting of resources • good level of strategic and operational commitment from the PCT • robust arrangements for the health care of looked after children,	*Being healthy*: • until recently, an upward trend in teenage conception rates against a national decline • the co-ordination and availability of CAMHS at tiers 1 and 3 • work to combat 'binge drinking and drug taking by young people.

Staying safe: • racial discrimination monitoring is effective in schools with arrangements for combating bullying and racial harassment • good and developing network of family support services • good collaboration between agencies in safeguarding children procedures • improving outcomes for looked after children and placement choice • improved standards in the children's residential units within an agreed strategy • good quality services for children with a disability.	*Staying safe*: • keeping thresholds, workload and capacity of children and families assessment under review to ensure a safe response • further development of local foster care to meet diverse needs of looked after children • developing methods for systematic monitoring of levels of bullying.
Enjoying and achieving: • strong and visionary leadership • targets met for early years provision • significant improvement in attainment at Key Stage 3 • very good school attendance • reduction in permanent exclusions and re-integration back into mainstream schooling • improved arrangements for school monitoring, challenge, support and intervention • good support for pupils with special educational needs • good range of recreational and voluntary learning opportunities on offer • very good youth service (Ofsted October 2004).	*Enjoying and achieving:* • attainment at Key Stages 1, 2 and 4 • value added between Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 4 in a significant number of schools • attainment of black and minority ethnic learners.

Making a positive contribution: • extensive range of consultation with children and young people in shaping services • reduced offending by children & young people • good support to young people leaving care.	*Making a positive contribution:* • developing a co-ordinated participation strategy • developing a comprehensive survey of attitudes of young people.
Achieving economic well-being • higher than average participation in education and work based learning • higher than average take up by young people from black and minority ethnic groups and by care leavers • good progress towards improving 14-19 provision	*Achieving economic well-being* • availability of provision for learners at aged 16 with statements of special educational needs • increase in accommodation for young people leaving care.

Service management

The authority has a clear and shared vision for children's services, together with a good approach to partnership working to help it achieve these. Based on an honest appraisal of its strengths and weaknesses, the council has developed a number of well-focused priorities. Plans to achieve these are ambitious and bold. There is very good senior management and political leadership to drive forward changes. The authority's track record of managing projects demonstrates that it has the capacity to succeed. The arrangements for scrutiny by elected members are effective. Decisions have been made about structural changes, Director designates are in place and initial consultation is underway. There is a strong commitment to involve all stakeholders and listen to their views.

The authority's has retained its Investors in People status and has a stable workforce with vacancy rates, reduced turnover and sickness rates in both education and social care lower than comparators. Performance indicators show an upward trend with effective systems in place for monitoring progress against targets.

The draft children and young people's planning process has built on previous work in the Children's Service Plan and the multi agency Best Value Review and is based securely on needs. In this process, as in most others, the partnership arrangements are strong. The infrastructure for the involvement of the voluntary and community sector is similarly being developed and is good. New posts, a Compact, and the Children's Trust development work show the clear commitment of all parties to closer working arrangements.

There are concerns about the capacity of current Information Communication Technology (ICT) systems to provide the data required to ensure the successful implementation of plans in a number of areas. Risks have been identified in the information sharing and the Integrated Children's System (ICS) project which is intended to contribute to the business requirements of the Children's services.

Oxfordshire's expenditure has increased overall over recent years. This is partly due to the investment of new money through the 'spend to save' strategy and partly to action taken to reduce expenditure for example through reducing surplus school places and the reorganisation of special needs education to reduce expensive out-of-county placements. However, an overspend in social care, while in line with projections, remains of concern to the council. The achievement of the three-year financial recovery strategy, Placement Matters, is crucial to achieving the change in the pattern of expenditure.

Areas for exploration in the Joint Area Review:

Being healthy

Healthy life-styles are promoted for children and young people:

- Reductions in alcohol abuse, drug taking and teenage conceptions.

Action is taken to promote children and young people's mental health:

- The co-ordination, availability and accessibility of services at all tiers

Staying safe

The incidence of child abuse and neglect is minimised:

- Consistent and adequate response to referrals across the county.

Looked after children live in safe environments and are protected from abuse and exploitation:

- The development of greater local placement choice for looked after children

Enjoying and achieving

Children and young people are enabled and encouraged to attend and enjoy school and to achieve highly:

- Targeted action to promote good behaviour particularly for pupils who are difficult to manage
- Improvements in 5 – 16 year olds personal and academic achievement
- Improvements in the attainment of black and minority ethnic young people.

Achieving economic well-being

Children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are helped to make a positive contribution:

- Children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are properly prepared and supported for transition to the next phase of education, training or employment
- There is an appropriate choice for them which meets their needs
- They receive impartial information, advice and guidance on post 16 opportunities.

Final judgements

Please see your final annual performance assessment judgements attached at the end of this letter.
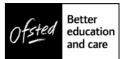
Yours sincerely

FLO HADLEY
Divisional Manager
Office for Standards in Education

JONATHAN PHILLIPS
Director – Quality, Performance and Methods
Commission for Social Care Inspection

CC: John Richards – Interim Director of Children's Services

APA final judgements 2005: Oxfordshire County Council

Areas for judgement	Final judgements[1]
The contribution of **the local authority's social care services** in maintaining and improving outcomes for children and young people	2
The contribution of **local authority's education services** in maintaining and improving outcomes for children and young people.	3
The contribution of the **local authority's children's services** in maintaining and improving outcomes for children and young people.	3
The council's overall capacity to improve its services for children and young people	3

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[1]

Grade	Service descriptors	Capacity to improve descriptors
4	A service that delivers well above minimum requirements for users	Very good
3	A service that consistently delivers above minimum requirements for users	Good/promising
2	A service that delivers only minimum requirements for users	Adequate
1	A service that does not deliver minimum requirements for users	Inadequate